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ABSTRACT

Hirst's approach to educational theory rejects the views that it is fundamentally philosophical or scientific. Rather, Hirst distinguishes between "forms of knowledge" (e.g., mathematics and physics), "fields of knowledge" (collections of knowledge from various forms with no unique concepts, structures, or tests), and "practical theories"; he finds educational theory to be a "practical theory," entirely dependent on forms of knowledge and thus unworthy of its status as an autonomous discipline. Hirst's initial assumption, that it is function of educational theory to determine practical aims, at once equating educational theory and practical theory, is limited, ill-founded, and misconceived. The notion of a grounding concept, functioning both descriptively and normatively, in justification, provides a means for understanding an important relationship between knowledge about education and practical principles for education; moreover, educational theory, taken as a body of descriptive-explanatory knowledge, can be distinguished from but still properly brought to bear on the forming of prescriptions for the conduct of education as a policy domain. (JA)

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relationships to them.

I

As a means for conducting such an examination, I turn to the treatment of "educational theory" provided by Professor Paul Hirst.[1] His is an especially useful one to examine because it raises many of the central conceptual issues that bear most directly upon an understanding of "educational theory." As a framework within which to conduct his investigation, Hirst sets for himself these questions: "What is educational theory, as a theoretical pursuit, trying to achieve? How does this theory relate to educational practice? What kind of theoretical structure has it got and how in fact do the various elements that are obviously part of it fit in?" He is, he says, "concerned with examining the concept of educational theory in the hope that we can move towards a more adequate framework within which research and teaching in this area can develop."[2] These are matters that deserve our close attention.

Hirst begins by reviewing and rejecting two familiar positions. One, which takes educational theory to be fundamentally philosophical and holds that it can be deduced directly from philosophical beliefs, he dismisses on the grounds that it promotes too simple an account of the passage from a very complex set of empirical and moral factors to the "practical principles" of educational theory. He says that "between philosophical beliefs in general and educational practice, we must clearly recognize a domain of theoretical

of knowledge.

"Practical theories," Hirst tells us, though [illegible] to organise knowledge, are quite a different matter. "Forms like history of science and fields like geography or the modern European mind are all organisations of knowledge significant primarily because of their importance for the development of cognition, of understanding in itself. We do, however, also have organisations of knowledge which will be called 'practical theories', whose whole raison d'etre is their practical function. In these it is not a patterning of understanding that is of first importance but the determination of what ought to be done in some sphere of practical activities."[3]

In its bearing upon educational theory, this account of organisations of knowledge leads, in Hirst's view, to three important points: 1) education theory, as a practical theory, has no unique conceptual structure, it calls for the publicity of the principles; 2) education theory is entirely dependent upon contributions from the forms of knowledge for its development and for the justification of its principles; 3) education theory must necessarily forego any pretensions to status as an autonomous discipline.

IV

There is much in what Hirst says with which one can readily agree. That the factors which combine to make up educational theory

the phrase "professional attitude" functions as the grounding concept.

2) College and university students should take a substantial role in the governance of the institutions they attend because those are their institutions. Here "democratic participation" is the prevailing concept.

3) College curricula ought to be only minimally structured because students learn most effectively when pursuing their own interests. Here the phrase "learn most effectively" serves as the grounding concept.

Justificatory talk about education is filled with traditional examples: In an earlier period, such concepts as "character building" and "discipline" were primary grounding concepts. "Democracy" and "good citizenship" have served well in this role. Their contemporary counterparts would seem to be such as "self-realization," "humanistic," and "open system."

The variety and interplay of these grounding concepts suggest several other features of justification. One is the function as termination of moral inquiry. A second, its motivational nature. And a third, its public character. Justification tends to end the treatment of a moral issue in a way that is conclusive and not obviously so. It does not ground the matter on ultimate, but on beyond which no further questions are possible, but neither does it sink into the swamp of infinite regress. An achieved justification is not incubitable; it is only unchallenged. Justification has its work

FOOTNOTES

1. Paul H. Hirst, "Educational Theory," In the Study of Education, ed. by J. W. Tibble (New York: The Humanities Press, 1966), pp. 29-58.

2. Ibid., p. 30.

3. Ibid., p. 31.

4. Ibid., pp. 41-42.

5. Ibid., p. 40.

6. Ibid., p. 42.

7. Ibid., p. 42.

8. Ibid., p. 47.

9. Ibid., p. 48.

10. Ibid., p. 32.

11. Ibid., p. 52.

12. Ibid., p. 51.

13. Ibid., p. 42.

13a. See W. D. Hudson, ed., The Is-Ought Question (London: Macmillan & Co., 1969) and Hobert W. Burns, "The Logic of the Educational Implication," Educational Theory, Vol. XII, No. 1, 1962, pp. 53-63.

14. See Gilbert Ryle, The Concept of Mind (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1949) and Israel Scheffler, The Language of Education (Springfield, Ill., C. Thomas, 1962).

15. R. S. Peters characterizes the educational principles so formed as "logical hybrids." See his "The Philosophy of Education," in The Study of Education, ed. by J. W. Tibble (New York: The Humanities Press, 1966), pp. 63-64.